



Vikas Krishan was at his dominant best.

## Krishan enters quarters of Asian Olympic Qualifiers

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FC COMMONWEALTH Games gold-medallist Vikas Krishan (69kg) entered the quarterfinals of the Asian Olympic Qualifiers of boxing with a thumping win over Kyrgyzstan's Nursultan Mamataly here on Friday.

Krishan clinched a 5-0 triumph to make the last eighth seed, where he will square off against third seed and Asian silver-medallist Sewonrets Okazawa of Japan. Okazawa, who won a gold medal at last year's Olympic test event in Tokyo, defeated Taiwan's Pan Hung-Ming in his pre-quarterfinal bout.

Krishan came into the event after claiming a gold medal at the South Asian Games in December last year. The SAG was his first amateur event after an undefeated stint in the professional circuit.

In a near-perfect display of his trademark defensive game, Krishan was consistently impressive. The Indian slowly built up the tempo and struck a particularly hard right hook in the second round to assert his dominance. The Kyrgyz boxer was left quite frustrated by Krishan's control over the proceedings.

Earlier, Sachin Kumar (81kg) advanced to the quarterfinals after notching up a comprehensive 5-0 win over Samoa's Dee Iapo.

Naman Tanwar became the first Indian to lose at the event as the 91kg contender went down in a lopsided decision to Syria's Alaa Ghousoun.

### Mary, Panghal begin quest

London Olympics bronze medallist Mary Kom (51kg) and World Championships silver medallist Amit Panghal (52kg) will begin their quest for a Tokyo Games berth when they enter the ring at the Asian Olympic Qualifiers here on Saturday.

Mary Kom's hunger at the age of 37 has been exemplary as she sets her sights on qualifying for the Olympics for a second time.

She has been putting in the hard yards at training a few months after earning a bronze at the World Championships, that made her the first boxer -- male or female -- to win a staggering eight medals from the Worlds.

The six-time world champion has been seeded second in her category and she will face New Zealand's Tasmyn Benny in the first round. Two wins will take her to Tokyo in what could realistically be her last appearance at the Games.

"Mary knows that this is her last Olympics and wants to do her best to close her dream with a medal. She has worked hard especially the reactivity work on the legs as well and has been working hard to be in good shape," said foreign coach of Indian women's boxing Raffaele Bergamasco.

Panghal is currently enjoying a purple patch in his career. A gold at the Asian Games was the start of his dominant show. He then bagged another gold at the Asian Championships before winning a historic silver at the World Championships. He starts off his campaign against Mongolia's Enkhmanadakh Kharkhuu after a first-round bye as the top seed in his category. He has a 1-1 record against his opponent. Determined as ever, Panghal is upbeat to avenge his defeat in his last meeting with Kharkhuu and get his campaign off to a great start.

# 'Want more Indians in Super League'

National coach Stimac says ISL should follow the Asian norm and have not more than four foreigners in a team

SHAHID JUDGE  
MUMBAI, MARCH 6

A CERTAIN rule change was implemented ahead of the 2017-2018 Indian Super League (ISL) that was expected to change the complexion of Indian football. The maximum number of foreign players allowed per squad was reduced from 11 to eight, and no more than five international players could take to the field at any time in a match - leaving at least six Indians on the pitch. It was a move that was met with positively, and one that was expected to encourage Indian goalkeepers in the starting line-up. To a great extent, that did happen.

In the current season, just one of the 10 teams has a starting custodian who is not Indian. Essentially that means that there are eight backups for Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, who at 28, has many years ahead of him as a goalkeeper. But this excess in-depth in the custodian's spot, that possibly stemmed from the rule, masks an even greater concern - that there is an alarming paucity of quality attacking players. And for national team coach Igor Stimac, the ISL needs to think of adopting the AFC rule on foreign players to address the problem.

"My suggestion for the top tier was to follow the AFC rule: 3+1 (three foreigners and one international player from an Asian country). That's the basic rule for the number of foreign players. It's not strange that the most successful Asian teams are following that rule. That's why they are successful. That's why they have the option for the national team to have strikers, to have midfielders and centrebacks," says Stimac. "The thing is, if you have 3+1 rule, then your second option is Indian striker. Then one centre back is Indian. Then your second option is Indian attacking midfielder. It makes a big difference."

Based on the AFC Champions League regulations from 2019, "each participating club may register four foreign participating players, however, at least one of these must have the nationality of an AFC member association."

Having a lesser number of foreigners in the line-up of ISL teams allows space for more outfield Indian players, which gives them more playing time and better chances of sharpening their skill. In terms of defence-minded players, Stimac has no shortage. What he's struggling to do is find a lethal attacker.

"If you consider that India with 1.5 billion people is having a top tier of 10 clubs, of which 60 percent (outfield players) are foreign players. This means there are only 40 players with an Indian passport, and out of these 40 players, 20 are fullbacks and 10 are defensive midfielders," he explains. "India is a team which is very difficult to beat today,



Igor Stimac at a training session with the Indian Arrows. The Croatian wants more young players to be given a chance. AIFF

you bring anyone, it's going to tough to beat us. But we are still not a team who can easily win games (because we don't have goalscorers)."

In the last few years, there's been a heavy reliance on Sunil Chhetri, the only consistent threat upfront for India's opponents. But the harsh truth is that the Bangalore FC forward is 35 and in the twilight of his career. Yet, there has been nobody good enough to replace him.

### Irreplaceable Chhetri

"We will never find a replacement for Sunil Chhetri while the situation is like this. We cannot take someone who never played striker, put him in the national team to play striker. And we don't have a striker in the I-League. Only Indian Arrows has an Indian striker but that's because it's a team only for Indian players. We have a big problem. But nobody wants to talk about that. You can bring (Jose) Mourinho and (Pep) Guardiola together here (as managers), and it will be the same," laments the 52-year-old, who was a part of the Croatian team that reached the 1998 FIFA World Cup semi-final.

In the current ISL season, where the best players in the country play, 23 Indians have been listed as 'forward' according to the ISL website. Only four, however, have played

over 900 minutes (the equivalent of 10 matches) through the season so far, with Chhetri playing the most, 1440 minutes over 16 matches. The numbers suggest that managers don't have much faith in their Indian forwards.

"The build-up for the U-17 World Cup in 2017 was made and executed perfectly. But how many of these kids are playing now? Where are they? Komal Thatal is warming up the bench in ATK. Amarjeet (Singh) was the only one which I picked immediately from the very beginning, and I recognised that he was the one who can give us aggressiveness, loyalty, awareness and strength in the middle, and I put him to play," Stimac says. "And because I put him to play in the national team, he was recognized by his club (Jamshedpur FC). It should be the other way around."

The coach, who has been in charge of the Indian team since May last year, is hoping to meet his players soon, since the outbreak of the coronavirus has delayed the national camp originally scheduled for March 9. According to him, he's called up the best Indians in the country, but maintains that these picks were easy to make.

"I called more than 40 players now in these two camps," he concludes. "It's very simple, this is all we have got."

### STIMAC SAYS

**ON INDIA NOT CONTINUING THE PROCESS AFTER U-17 WORLD CUP**  
We could easily help organise greater selection of young players in India every three months. We can divide India into five regions, north, south, east, west and central and organise 100,000 kids to be tested through selection in three-five days, and then come down to the number of 10,000 kids which are talented for football - with their speed, height, weight, talent. Out of these 10,000 we can get 2000 fantastic players.

**ON INDIANS NOT GETTING MANY CHANCES TO PLAY IN THE ISL**  
We closed these positions in ISL and I-League. Where are they going to play? Playing against the best players, you become one of the best. That's how you rise up in football. If you keep playing in the (local) league, you cannot advance your game to certain heights. These city or local leagues are the step in this structure work.

# Gojo overcomes nerves to beat Prajnesh; Cilic makes it 2-0

SHAHID JUDGE  
MUMBAI, MARCH 6

A BIG serve out wide produced a weak and short return from Prajnesh Gunneswaran. Borna Gojo duly glided down the court, opened up his body, not bothering to hide his intent of finishing off the point with an inside out forehand winner. Prajnesh stood rooted to the spot. Only, Gojo inexplicably thumped his forehand into the net.

That was the first point of India's Davis Cup World Group qualifier tie against Croatia. It was a point Gojo had no business losing. The nerves from Gojo, who was playing in only his second tie and third match overall, were evident.

About 90 minutes later, Prajnesh was commanding a rally on the indoor hard court at the Dom Sportova in Zagreb. He pushed the 22-year-old deep into his forehand side, then back to the backhand. The Indian played another angled shot again to Gojo's forehand side, this time marching up to the net. Gojo, running and on the stretch, played a cross-court passing winner. It was a rally Gojo had no business win-

ning. It gave him the break of serve in the third game of the third set. He took the lead for the first time in the match, a lead he would not relinquish, as he'd go on to register an upset 3-6, 6-4, 6-2 win. Gojo's win gave Croatia the first point of the tie. In the second rubber, 2014 US Open champion Marin Cilic extended the lead after picking a hard fought 7-6(8), 7-6(8) win over a tenacious Ramkumar Ramanathan in a match that went on for two hours and 12 minutes. At the end of day 1 of the two-day tie, the Croats hold a 2-0 lead.

It wasn't the start India were expecting. In fact, with the presence of former world no 3 Cilic in the mix, it was the two singles rubbers against Gojo that the visitors were targeting, and with good reason.

Just last month, the world no 277 decided to forgo his final year of college, at the Wake Forest University in the United States, in favour of turning professional. In terms of Davis Cup experience though, he was called into the line-up for the Finals last November, but lost both his singles matches to then world no 23 Andrey Rublev and former world no 1 Rafael Nadal. And against Prajnesh, he was coming up

Just last month, the world no 277 Gojo decided to forgo his final year of college, at the Wake Forest University in the United States, in favour of turning professional. In terms of Davis Cup experience though, he was called into the line-up for the Finals last November, but lost both his singles matches.

against a player ranked much higher, 132, and with much more experience. Perhaps that's what caused the nerves at the start of the match. Gojo dropped serve twice in the first set, conceding 18 unforced errors and hitting no winners at all. The changeover after the first set was an opportunity to calm down.

And in the first game of the second set, Gojo broke Prajnesh's serve: staying in the rally on his sixth break point attempt, playing into the

angles to open up the court, botching up an overhead smash, but then redeeming himself to slot home a backhand volley. That game was the first sign of what the 6-foot-5 was capable of. The defence grew steadily, and the number of percentage shots over the lowest part of the net increased. The groundstrokes fluctuated between flat and topspin, and the angled shots opened more of the court. The patience grew, and the momentum shifted.

On Prajnesh's part, the Indian stuck to his guns in the second set, playing the big forehand and serve, using the backhand to keep in the rally and snuff out an opening. The only difference was the way Gojo handled the situation. The Split-native, playing in his first Davis Cup tie on home soil lapped up the support from the crowd, getting them more involved in the match, as he started to dictate proceedings. He did get broken in the third set, but at that point, he had already taken two games on Prajnesh's serve, and soon broke for the third time. After an hour and 57 minutes, the tall Croat launched his ninth ace of the match to give the home team the first point of the tie. The Indians had hoped to exploit Gojo over two

## FC Goa eye great comeback vs Chennaiyin in ISL semifinal

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
MARGAO, MARCH 6

FC Goa face Chennaiyin FC in the second leg of their Indian Super League semifinals, looking to overturn a 4-1 deficit, at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium here on Saturday. FC Goa will be boosted by the return of Edu Bedia who missed the first leg game in Chennai - which they lost 1-4 - due to personal reasons.

There is more good news as Brandon Fernandes and Hugo Boumous, who were injured for last week's tie, are back in contention for a start. Boumous, in particular, has been in spectacular form this season having scored 10 and assisted 11 in 14 matches.

With the return of Brandon, FC Goa would hope for better deliveries from wide positions, something which was missing from their game in the first leg.

Ferran Corominas will play as a number nine after playing as a withdrawn forward in the last game. The Spanish striker has 14 goals to his name this season and FC Goa need his goals now more than ever.

Interim coach Clifford Miranda will have a decision to make as to whether he would deploy an all-attacking line-up of Bedia, Boumous and Corominas or choose to go with two foreign centre-backs in Mourta Fall and Carlos Pena.

"We have to win to overcome the deficit, but that does not mean we go all out from minute one. It's 90 minutes and more and whatever football that I know, it is not decided in the first 10 to 15 minutes. It will be till the final whistle and we will take it minute-by-minute," Miranda said.

Meanwhile, Chennaiyin FC would look to score first and make the task even more improbable for the home side. Should Chennaiyin find the back of the net, FC Goa would need at least five goals to move to the final.

Chennaiyin head coach Owen Coyle has mentioned that his players would not be lackadaisical in the second leg, despite enjoying a three-goal lead.

He would also ask for an improved performance from the front three of Nerijus Valskis, Rafael Crivellaro and Andre Schembri who had a quiet game by their standards in Chennai. FC Goa also need to keep a check on the Chennaiyin attackers who are more than capable of hurting the opponent through a quick counter-attack.

"When you have any sort of advantage, it's good to have that. That being said, we know we have a very dangerous match. Over the course of the 18 games in the league, they have been the best team," said Coyle.

## [SPORTS BAR]

### Banerjee on pacemaker support, says family

Legendary Indian footballer P K Banerjee suffered a cardiac arrest on Friday and he has been put on pacemaker support, family sources said. "His condition is critical after suffering a cardiac arrest. He's been put on pacemaker," a family source told PTI. The 83-year-old Asian Games gold medallist is suffering from respiratory problem due to pneumonia. He has an underlying history of Parkinson's disease, dementia and heart problem. He has been on life support since March 2.

### Solskjaer frustrated over scheduling

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has voiced his frustration over how Manchester United's preparations for their derby against Manchester City have been impeded by the scheduling of their midweek FA Cup tie. United cruised through to the quarter-finals at second-tier Derby on Thursday, when Luke Shaw's second career goal and two strikes from January signing Odion Ighalo wrapped up a 3-0 win. Europa League football this season means United are used to playing on Thursdays, but City have an extra day to prepare for Sunday's Old Trafford encounter. "It's that help we get from the FA again - that extra 24 hours that they've had," Solskjaer said. "I cannot believe why there's a derby on Sunday and we've got to play Thursday night."



GMs P Harikrishna and Vidit Gujrathi are likely to join Anand in the team.

### Anand to lead Indian squad, Kramnik to coach

Five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand will lead the Indian team in the 44th Chess Olympiad to be held in Moscow in August with the legendary Vladimir Kramnik set to train the men's squad. World number two Koneru Humpy will be the spearhead among Indian women in the biennial event that is likely to see participation of around 180 countries, a press release from All India Chess Federation (AICF) said. The 44th Chess Olympiad will be held from August 5 to 18. Apart from the 50-year old Anand, Grandmasters P Harikrishna and Vidit Gujrathi look like to be certainties in the men's team. However, it could be a close race for the remaining spots in the five-member men's team. B Adhiban is expected to take one of the places on current form while the likes of K Sasikiran, S P Sethuraman, Surya Shekhar Ganguly and Aravindh Chithambaram would also be in contention for other spots in the team. Humpy and Dronavalli Harika will form part of the women's team on the basis of their rankings, while Tania Sachdev, Bhakti Kulkarni and R Vaishali are front-runners for the remaining three slots on current form.

### Rutuja wins, Ankita loses against Taiwan

Rutuja Bhosale came back from the brink in the deciding set to win yet another marathon contest but Ankita Raina suffered her second straight singles defeat as India and Taiwan were locked 1-1 in their Fed Cup match against Taiwan. Up against lower-ranked Ya-Yi Yang, Rutuja eked out a 6-3 3-6 7-6(6). In the second singles, Ankita Raina lost 6-3 2-6 3-6 to En Shuo Liang. Sania Mirza and Ankita are scheduled to play against Hao-Ching Chan and Latisha Chan. India lost to China before winning against Uzbekistan and Korea.



### Injury-plagued Murray eyes return in Miami

Andy Murray hopes to make his latest comeback at this month's Miami Open as the former world number one battles to recover from his injury woes. Murray is back on the practice court after being unable to hit for three months because of what was initially diagnosed as a mild bone bruise. The 32-year-old believes the problem was actually bone growth associated with the hip resurfacing operation he had in January 2019. Now Murray has raised the prospect of taking a wild card into the ATP tournament in Miami, which begins on March 25. "I'm training to try and get ready for Miami," Murray told Amazon Prime Video. "I've done so much rehab these last few months that, in terms of my strength and everything, all of the muscles around the hip are working well, it's just I hadn't played tennis."

### Chawrasia 14th in Qatar, Sharma misses cut

Indian golfer SSP Chawrasia dropped a bogey on the very last hole and finished at two-under 70 in the second round of the Qatar Masters Championship here on Friday. Chawrasia, who was ninth overnight, dropped to T-14 even as his colleague Shubhankar Sharma (71-78) missed the cut. Chawrasia birdied fourth, sixth and eighth to go three under before dropping a shot on ninth just as he did on first day. On the back nine, he birdied 10th and had seven pars before again dropping a shot on the final hole. Jorge Campillo and Andy Sullivan shared the lead heading into the weekend. But they had a host of European Tour winners breathing down their necks at Education City Golf Club.